*Perspectives on Visual Learning*

# Vision Fulfilled
## The Victory of the Pictorial Turn

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András Benedek / Kristóf Nyíri (eds.)

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# The Victory of the Pictorial Turn

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Vision Fulfilled: The Victory of the Pictorial Turn

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## 1. One

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„What is important now is
to recover our senses.
We must learn to *see* more,
to *hear* more, to *feel* more."[1]

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Anthropology has long incorporated filmmaking to its repertoire, although the ambiguities that arise from its use have proven to be enduring. Its adoption in what was conceived as a science of words respected an initial purpose of preserving visually rich aspects of cultures, especially ones thought as fated to disappear. But, as the use of film moved away from this documentary purpose – without ever abandoning it – to venture into producing and diffusing academic knowledge, the degree to which it depended on words to convey scholarly meaning became a highly contentious topic. Maurice Bloch iconically affirms a hierarchy according to which words are indispensable: for him, as Lucien Taylor puts it, "textuality itself, and textuality alone (a 'thesis'), is the condition of possibility of a legitimate ('discussive, intellectual') visual anthropology. *Visuality itself becomes merely ancillary, illustrative rather than constitutive of anthropological knowledge.*"[2] Central to this debate is an argument around the inability of deriving unequivocal meaning from pictorial discourse: again in the words of Lucien Taylor, "the indexicality of ethnographic film makes it open-ended, and thus susceptible to differing interpretations in a way anthropological writing is not. … The

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[1] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*, New York: Picador, 1966, p. 10.
[2] Lucien Taylor, "Iconophobia: How Anthropology Lost It at the Movies", *Transition* 69 (1996), p. 66 (my italics).

various features that make up the whole defy reduction into isolated, unique characters, each with its own singular referent. In this regard, *pictures are dense in a way that texts are not*".[3]

Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* (1986) is a film that clearly embodies this dissention: considered by some an "art film", it is an almost entirely wordless study of Benares, India, relying primarily on images and sounds to convey meaning – with the notable exception of an epigraph by William Butler Yeats. The film is strongly criticized by Alexander Moore, who deems it "deficient" for attempting to convey information only visually, a perceptual mode with intrinsic limitations of its own. His opinion is echoed by Jonathan Parry, for whom the refusal to offer contextualization or commentary testifies to a misleading belief that images can speak for themselves. Moreover, neither the type of intelligibility it lends itself to not its aesthetic qualities would be, in themselves, enough to define the film as anthropological. "No explanation is possible", he writes, "and all we can do is stand and stare."[4] The open-ended character of sense-making in *Forest of Bliss* is also the basis for its acclaim. Enthusiasts affirm that its *silent eloquence* precludes any single interpretation or mode of cognition from taking precedence over any other, pointing toward "an open door beyond which the conventional divisions between document and fiction, sense and the senses, do not exist".[5] Fusing together cognition and the senses, it enables what Mauro Bucci calls a "conceptual response", although his argument maintains that the audience is more immediately engaged by the emotional and sensorial aspects of the film "regardless of his or her narrative or symbolic understanding".[6]

In fact, it is renewed interest in the senses by contemporary anthropology that stands as the epistemological cornerstone for cur-

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[3] *Ibid.*, p. 75 and p. 85.

[4] Jonathan P. Parry, "Comment on Robert Gardner's 'Forest of Bliss'", *Society for Visual Anthropology Newsletter*, vol. 4, issue 2 (1988), p. 7.

[5] Michael Oppitz, "A Day in the City of Death. 'Forest of Bliss' (by Robert Gardner) – A Film Review", *Anthropos* 83 (1988), p. 212.

[6] Mauro Bucci, "*Forest of Bliss*: Sensory Experience and Ethnographic Film", *Visual Ethnography*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2012), p. 14.

rent experimental approaches to ethnographic film. It has allowed filmmakers to operate a shift from the interpretive density of Clifford Geertz's "thick description" towards a phenomenological one, where "the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility and for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication".[7] By attending to dimensions of human experience that have nothing to do with verbalism, sensory ethnographic films – thought of as a genre – capitalize exactly on pictorial density, which, in this context, ceases to be regarded as an excess to be contained. They enable forms of engagement that are based less on *exposition* and more on *exposure*, mainly empathy, implication, and sensuous elicitation. In his defense of a "knowledge of being" – opposed to a "knowledge as meaning"– David MacDougall affirms that films offer "a way of knowing that is different from thinking".[8] But is it possible to devise a theoretical framework that moves beyond the senses and towards the realm of thought without capitulating to verbalism? Can films think, as well as feel?

## 2. Two

> "In this literate age there is an emphasis upon verbalism that I think makes things quite difficult, because it has confounded understanding with explanation and we feel that if we cannot perfectly articulate and explain what we feel, we have not understood it…"[9]

At odds with his indisposition towards poetic ethnographic films, Maurice Bloch maintains that language and language-like norms are not an essential feature of conceptual thought: much of human

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[7] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. 135.

[8] David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses*, Princeton, NJ: University Press, 2006, p. 7.

[9] Maya Deren, "New Directions in Film Art", in Bruce Rice McPherson (ed.), *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film*, Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 2005, p. 212.

knowledge is constituted non-linguistically through engagement with the world, and is partly transformed if transported into the verbal domain. While some concepts may take the form of a sequential chain of propositions, others bundle together a plethora of materials in a mobile constellation of partly concrete and partly abstract connections. For the author, "classificatory concepts" "are formed through reference back to rather vague and provisional 'prototypes' which anchor loosely-formed 'families' of specific instances"[10]. Rather than operating under the same logic of a checklist or encyclopaedia entry with well-marked contours, they emerge from an appraisal of their referents in the physical world – also known as "best exemplars" – and an assessment of their composition, making up provisional "scripts" by means of which distinct phenomena are understood. Categories like these exist independently from language, comprising malleable pattern networks of "chunked knowledge" that defy reduction into sentence-logic models. Thus, although they generally lend themselves to some degree of verbal description, this method proves inadequate to accurately convey their organizational logic. In these cases, Bloch encourages anthropologists to "make much more use of description of the way things look, sound, feel, smell, taste and so on – drawing on the realm of bodily experience".[11]

What *Forest of Bliss* does, through a vast range of cinematic elements, is provide viewers with the concrete substance and indicate connections out of which complex concepts and ideas of this type can be constructed, or by way of which prior prototypes can be destabilized and enlarged. By watching the film, the audience confronts a world designed to bring into view a number of semi-abstract insights which cannot completely forgo the extremely granular materialities that prompted them. The viewer is actively implicated in a heuristic process of combining, organizing, classifying, and deriving from the highly heterogeneous array of – external and internal – elements that comprise cinematic experience to weave loose networks of signi-

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[10] Maurice Bloch, "Language, Anthropology and Cognitive Science", *Man*, vol. 26, no. 2  (1991). p. 185
[11] *Ibid*., p. 193.

fication and, with them, arrive at novel abstract-concrete categories, or supplement and rearrange previously existing ones to accommodate new input. Thus, barren explanatory categories such as "cyclicity", "decay", and "transcendence" are significantly broadened and elaborated upon as the viewer deploys them as analytical operators and ascribes tangible and embodied meaning to them. Kindred notions may be conceived – not necessarily verbally – to gauge more elusive realizations. Thus, the means by which sense-making is realized in *Forest of Bliss* is by tentatively "scripting" concepts and ideas that the encounter with the film brings forth. Their complexity hardly resists being flattened out by the hollow vocabulary of conventional language.

The particular insights that *Forest of Bliss* aims at conveying are fundamentally non-linguistic, and the film's images and sounds – along with the subjective parts supplied by the viewer – are the stuff that composes them. Meaning must be experienced – not inferred – within the aesthetic paradigm of the film as a whole. Its form is, therefore, not a detachable component of its content, constituting both the matter and the analytic lens that makes understanding possible. In fact, Ákos Östör asserts, in his response to Jonathan Parry, that "the esthetics of this film are a part of the visual (and anthropological) interpretation without which there would be no film at all. … The film constructs its meaning through these devices."[12] These incite, evoke, produce, and provoke thought in the audience by virtue of their continued engagement with the film, where sensing "acts as a constantly available channel that productively couples agent and environment rather than as a kind of 'veil of transduction' whereby world-originating signals must be converted into a persisting inner model of the external scene".[13] Instead of expecting images to speak for themselves, the viewer must integrate a composite circuit with

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[12] Ákos Östör, "Is That What Forest of Bliss Is All About? A Response", *Society for Visual Anthropology Newsletter*, vol. 5, issue 1 (1989), p. 5. The devices Östör lists are: form, composition, light, camera angle, pace, flow, structure, editing, montage.

[13] Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 15.

*Forest of Bliss*, in which both think together. The moment this circuit is interrupted – i.e. when the viewer effectively "throws away" the film from his or her thought process – is when thinking *with* the film gives way to thinking *about* it.

Ultimately, *Forest of Bliss* engages the viewer both physically and intellectually in the processes of ascribing meaning to things beyond the socially-shared categories of language. The immediate readiness of understanding that characterizes verbal communication levels complexities down to common denominators in the process of encoding them in purely abstract formulations. Moreover, language is incapable of registering sensorial and embodied information. The film restores these dimensions of understanding, structurally unavailable in language, to the cognitive process of the viewer, qualitatively altering the means of engaging the world that unfolds before them. Instead of boxing the world in the confines of sentential linguistic conceptualization, *Forest of Bliss* enforces upon cognition the polysemic mandate of materiality, which, by its own token, defies and resists reduction into pure abstraction.

## 3. Three

> "Une autre idée du cinéma est possible,
> celle où les oeuvres ne nous divertissent pas,
> mais nous diversifient.
> Un cinéma où les sons et les images
> ne sont pas les véhicules,
> mais le point de suture de la pensée."[14]

Some key implications of restoring thought and cognition to a sensory approach to film should be derived from this very brief discussion. The driving ambition shifts from providing a sensorial window into a given reality to mobilizing the cinematic experience to assist thought to unfold. The endeavour of bringing into fruition a mental process in which film and viewer are mutually implicated and which attends to the goal of conceiving and remodelling conceptual

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[14] Mouloud Boukala, *Le Dispositif Cinématographique: Un Processus pour [Re]-Penser l'Anthropologie*, Paris: Téraèdre, 2009, pp. 34–35.

"scripts" demands filmmakers to place greater emphasis on suggesting connective pathways between heterogeneous cinematic elements, especially through camerawork and montage techniques. Moreover, because film is regarded as a process – rather than a product – it is never fully realized except in reception, and, therefore, requires built-in strategies to encourage active modes of viewership. Finally, the proposed shift from *how things feel* to *how thought may be transformed by how things feel* imbues filmmaking with a fundamentally imaginative – rather than documentary – orientation.

Within this project, the development of unorthodox filmmaking practices that efface the boundary between form and content become imperative. Maya Deren proclaims experience to be the single possible avenue of education. "When a person comes in, experiences something, and goes away a bit different, he has been educated. Art", she concludes, "is the only educational medium."[15] Anthropology and its films must embrace art to fulfill their educational vocation. They must take on the challenge of putting forward experiences that invoke the ineffable world of thought. To enable this, rhetorical strategies specific to the cinematic medium ought to be systematically studied beyond a purely sensorial paradigm in order to assess their appropriateness to anthropological discourse. It is through the effort of reapproaching *sense* and *the senses* that films – moving away from simply reproducing reality – can unsettle what would have otherwise been taken for granted and, therefore, live up to the promise of reconfiguring the ways in which we understand and engage with the world.

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[15] Deren, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

This volume convincingly demonstrates that after the temporary dominance of excessively verbal thinking in the age of the printed word, during the past decades a pictorial turn has actually happened – in the real world, in the sciences, and in most of the humanities. Human thinking is primordially visual.
In the course of human evolution it was the language of gestures, not verbal language, which introduced conceptual order into the episodic imagery of pre-linguistic thought. The idea of the primacy of the visual, beginning with Plato, is continuous through Aristotle to the British Empiricists in the 17th–18th centuries, and is today once more on the rise.

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